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Mr. Putin's Fantasy

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Mr. Putin's Fantasy: The Analysis of Techno-Populist Discourse in Russia

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BACKGROUND

Previous research suggests that political regime in modern Russia could be described as a mix of technocracy and populism. Scholars commonly identify populist appeals to the people from political leaders and the neoconservative rhetoric built on anti-American attitudes and the 'special path of modern Russia'. Whereas technocracy post-Soviet Russia is rather associated with the science of bureaucratic management and decision-making, whilst the governing elite is perceived as the only people possessing the necessary expertise and skills. This paradoxical combination has been studied in other countries and is often described as technocratic populism, or simply techno-populism. Blending these opposites usually serves the purposes of legitimisation for the political regime.

RESEARCH

The study analyses 7 Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly, conducted annually, from 2013 to 2020. The main objective of this research was to grasp the structure of official public discourse in Russia: outline its main themes in their relations to techno-populism. The selected time period captures two of the latest Presidential terms of Vladimir Putin, which marks the new shift in domestic and foreign politics associated commonly with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Each speech comprises the President's agenda for the next year of governing and rests upon the similar set of topics including social and economic issues, cultural development and foreign affairs. Speeches vary because of the scale of development of certain topics and the emphasis made through the order of the topics marking the current priorities of the head of state.

METHOD

At first, open coding is conducted where the researcher is looking for data saturation through similarities and differences within the sample. During this stage I thoroughly read the transcripts line by line and analytically identified nodes relating to the subject and grouped them in initial topics. Secondly, I went through the nodes emerged in open coding, compared them to each other and identified certain connections and relations that were put together as themes. This process called axial coding helped to navigate the data and focus further on the analysis of common discursive practices that tie themes together as a whole.

Mr. Putin's Fantasy

'This is a crucial moment when countries need to compete to secure their roles in the global division of labour for decades ahead. We can and must become one of the leaders. Russia has no right to be vulnerable'

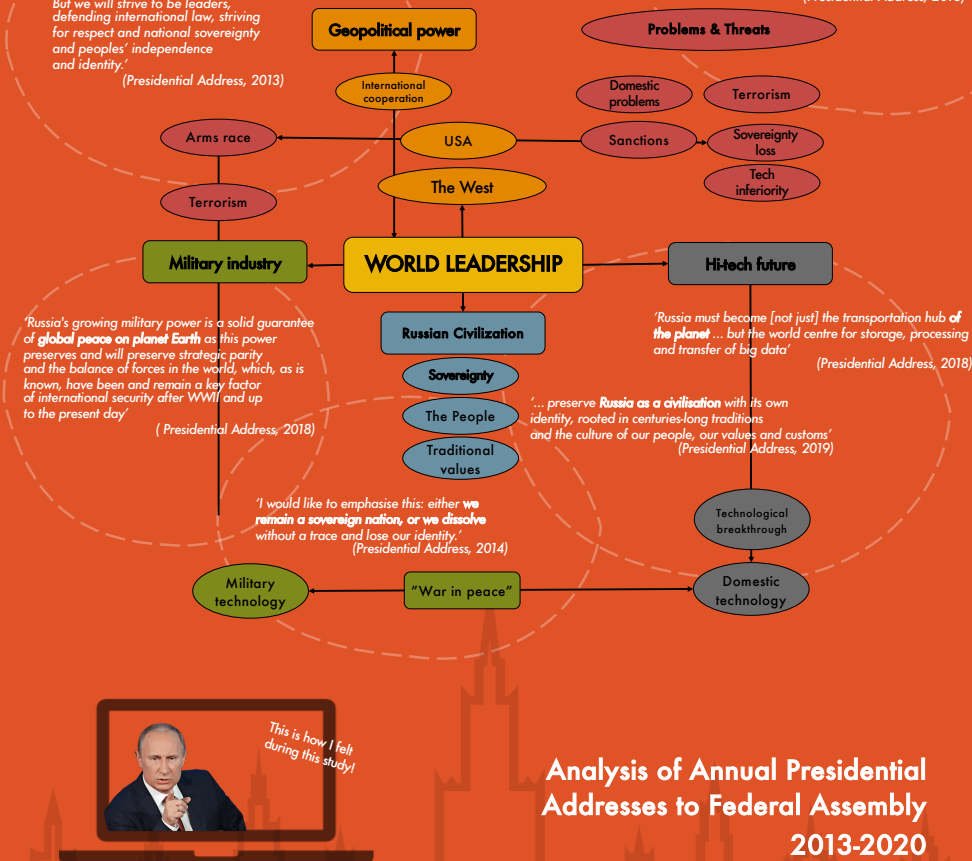
(Presidential Address, 2015)

'We do not claim to be any sort of superpower with a claim to global or regional hegemony; we do not encroach on anyone's interests, impose our patronage onto anyone, or try to teach others how to live their lives. But we will strive to be leaders, defending international law, striving for respect and national sovereignty and peoples' independence and identity.'

(Presidential Address, 2013)

People of Russia have proven that can respond to the significant challenges, defend and protect national interests, sovereignty and independent course of the state.'

(Presidential Address, 2018)



RESULTS: KEY THEMES

The central theme which transforms into a unifying idea for governance is **world leadership**. For Mr. Putin, Russia must be strong to preserve its legacy. Leadership position rests upon three supporting themes: the tradition and values of **Russian civilisation**, the supremacy of its **military industrial complex**, and its **geopolitical power**. Also, leadership is envisioned into a fourth theme of **high-tech future**, followed by a technological breakthrough. The position of power is legitimised by a demand to **confront problems and threats** that the country is facing. These themes create certain narratives that structure public agenda and are united by the discourse of techno-populism which provides a specific format of articulation. Populist element of the discourse is constituted by the capabilities of the leader to connect with the public, while the technocratic element is represented by a management style in which the state is governed.

RESULTS: TECHNO-POPULIST MANIFESTATIONS

The speeches are highly populist and carry a strong appeal to the people, whose image is constructed through references to the special path of Russia, which is led to oppose The West. The people along with the government are always mobilised against the enemy. The enemy comes in multiple guises: as a threat to traditional values or national borders, forcing into the arms race or possibility of technological inferiority. Yet all the threats are subjugated to the fear of losing leadership and sovereignty.

Populist discourse is nostalgic and progressivist at the same time. Mr. Putin calls to praise the strength of country throughout the history, highlighting their strength, modesty, conservatism and traditionalism. Yet he creates a picture of high-tech future, foreseeing the prosperity of the state built on its technological advancements.

Technocracy in Mr. Putin's speeches comes as a solution which brings this futuristic fantasy to life. It is mostly technocratic way to materialise his populist commitments through public management. The efficient management requires significant optimising and standardisation. Mr. Putin often calls and sets the goal of adjusting and creating new ways of governance that will help in overcoming problems of the field. Another recurrent subject is increasing the efficiency of government services through automation and digitisation. Mr. Putin believes that integrating digital systems would lead towards economic growth and more transparency in public management.

DISCUSSION

One striking trend revealed through this analysis is the growing role of technology in discourse of officialdom. Technology interweaves into populist and technocratic discourses, connects the past and the future. Yet, the official discourse itself is thinning. While in 2013 and earlier, it used to comprise the agenda that represented interests of diverse population groups, every speech from then on was mostly focused themes which I have outlined. It is repetitive and vague, and does not reflect the reality anymore. The moments when Mr. Putin talks about real lives of ordinary people show extreme contrast between the pressing problems and the pictured futuristic vision of Russia. The discourse is now subjugated the fantasy of the world leadership, which does not represent the interests of the people as it claims to do.

Analysis of Annual Presidential
Addresses to Federal Assembly
2013-2020